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Sejersen, Frank

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INDIGENOUS URBANISM REVISITED
THE CASE OF GREENLAND

Frank Sejersen

Introduction

The majority of Greenlanders (Kalaallit), the Inuit people of Greenland, have been living along the 2,670 kilometre coastline of western Greenland, the world's biggest island, for centuries. Only a minority have inhabited the east coast. The status of Greenlanders as indigenous is grounded in their colonial relationship with Denmark, which dates back more than 250 years. Throughout this period, Greenlanders have changed their settlement patterns quite dramatically. The Danish government has pursued different settlement policies ranging from decentralisation to centralisation, depending on its specific resource and welfare strategies. In the post Second World War period urbanisation was, for example, seen by the Danish government as a necessary step to improve conditions in Greenland. Greenlanders, on the other hand, very often considered urbanisation to be a destructive colonial project, as the improvements in living conditions were also linked to a radical change in their way of life and cultural orientation. Today, 80% of the population in Greenland lives in cities, and numbers are increasing (Grønlands Statistik 2006: 79).

Since 1979, Greenland has had regional self-governance, and the Greenland Home Rule, which is dominated by Inuit, is in full charge of most domestic matters and policy-making. Today, the Home Rule government is promoting centralisation and urbanisation based on arguments that are quite similar to the former Danish colonial and post-colonial policies. This apparent paradox can only be fully understood if it is appreciated that contemporary urbanisation is the government's strategy by which to strengthen Inuit self-determination. Thus in Greenland, urbanisation of the indigenous population, promoted by its own government, casts a new perspective on some issues related to the urbanisation of indigenous peoples in general.

Colonisation

Whereas the Danish preferred a decentralised settlement pattern when Greenland's primary resources were marine mammals (seals and whales), the centralisation of the population was seen as an advantage from the beginning of the 20th century on, when the emerging fishing industry depended on a stable and accessible workforce. After the Second World War, two Danish political initiatives (G50 and G60) designed to encourage (among other things) urbanisation led to the closure of a number of smaller communities. The movement of parts of the Greenlandic population to a handful of towns was seen by the Danish government as a way of implementing modernisation, industrialisation and improved living conditions. In 1968, for example, the Danish government decided to close down the mining town of Qullissat because it was considered unprofitable (Dahl 1986: 51). More than 1,000 people had to be moved to other places in Greenland.

In the few towns selected as the primary engines of development, substantial investments were channelled into infrastructure, housing, production facilities and educational as well as health institutions. The construction and running of these fast growing cities was primarily in the hands of Danes and, increasingly, Greenlanders felt like bystanders in the development of their own homeland. Consequently, they very often perceived urbanisation, and the city itself, as a Danish colonial project. During the 1960s and 1970s, Greenlanders fighting for self-governance used the cities as a symbol of *Danification*, i.e. the colonial process of assimilating Greenlanders into a Danish way of thinking and behaving. Not surprisingly, the hunting and fishing way of life in the smaller communities was singled out by these political activists as more in line with the Greenlandic culture and way of thinking than the hectic urban city life.

Social problems

As part of the critique of the urbanisation and modernisation policy pursued by the Danes, Greenlanders moving to the city were portrayed as free hunters being turned into (seasonal unemployed) workers. Values associated with gender roles, being on the land, traditional skills, family etc. were challenged in the city, which many saw as being culturally and socially destructive. In fact, the 1950s and 1960s are often con-

Nuuk - Photo: Jakob Christensen Medonos

sidered as the period when Denmark's colonial presence had its strongest impact.

For many, urbanisation was traumatic, and people still talk of city life as being 'non-Greenlandic'. Nuuk, the biggest city in Greenland, is for example often referred to by Danes and Greenlanders alike as a non-Greenlandic town in the following way: "If you've only been to Nuuk you've not seen the real Greenland". The town was seen as *the* place of acculturation and modernisation - a point of view that often led to city life being described as one of anonymity and loneliness. This is not unique to Greenland. Referring to Iqaluit, the capital of Inuit-controlled Nunavut in northern Canada, journalist Jane George (2001) says that: "Nunavut's capital can be a cold place, where — unlike any other community in Nunavut — passers-by don't automatically greet each other on the street". This understanding of urban life as destructive of the cohesive mechanisms that maintain traditional social order and life in the small communities has dominated theories of urbanisation since the end of the 19th century.

For many Greenlanders, moving to the city meant facing up to a number of problems (if not personally then as part of city life): alcohol abuse, domestic violence, suicide attempts, social fragmentation and cultural disorientation. Added to these were unemployment, housing problems, language shortcomings and health issues. Many explain the root of the problem in the following way: "The development took place too fast".

Self-governance

1979 was a turning point for the Inuit in Greenland. Home Rule was introduced and a regional government was established that was quite rapidly handed responsibility for most domestic matters (Nuttall 1994). Every year, the Inuit-dominated government receives a considerable block grant from Denmark in order to ensure the financial basis on which to provide welfare services for the region's estimated popu-

lation of 57,000 (including approximately 6,500 Danes). Only a few matters remain under the control of Denmark. Foreign policy is one political area in which Greenland has tried to gain more influence over the last decades. In 2005, an agreement was finally reached between Greenland and Denmark that gave Greenland a far bigger say in foreign policy, as well as the possibility of pursuing limited independent negotiations with foreign states.

Today, it is Greenland's ambition to obtain a greater degree of independence from Denmark, and economic dependence on the yearly block grant has been singled out as the main obstacle to establishing a more self-sustained Greenland capable of developing on its own terms. A Greenlandic Commission on Self-Determination recently suggested a reorganisation of the economic structure in order to advance this process. In its report, the Commission puts great emphasis on changes that may result in more cost-effective production and administration. The concentration of people in cities is only mentioned indirectly insofar as the preconditions for the proposed development are based on the idea that production should be located where the conditions are best. This means where overheads are as low as possible and where an educated workforce is available. Due to the high costs of transport, water and electricity in Greenland, and in the Arctic in general, this has to mean the towns. The Greenlandic government decided to follow the Commission's suggestions and implemented real-cost prices for transport, water and electricity. So it has now become more expensive to live in remote areas than in densely-populated areas, where costs can be maintained at a lower level. This policy encourages centralisation in a few centres and thus threatens the livelihoods of thousands of Greenlanders living in smaller communities. Centralisation, which has been noted by Greenlanders as being a colonial Danish project, has now turned into a prerequisite for the development of a truly self-sustained non-colonial Greenland. But this admirable goal may also have its negative side-effects.

Photo: Kathrin Wessendorf

Contemporary urbanisation

Compared to the rapid increase in size of other cities around the world, Arctic cities are definitely small, scattered and invisible in the global economy. Many people therefore often feel uncomfortable talking about urbanism and urbanisation in the Arctic. It does indeed sound a contradiction in terms. But cities like Iqaluit (Canada), Nuuk (Greenland), Yakutsk (Siberia), Anchorage and Fairbanks (Alaska) are important drivers of development in the Arctic. In Greenland, three major cities can be singled out: Nuuk – the capital - (15,000 inhabitants), Sisimiut (6,000) and Ilulissat (3,000). 40% of the population of Greenland live in these three cities. What's more, over 80% of the Greenlandic population live in cities. These cities are major economic drivers. Six out of ten land-based industries in Greenland are, for example, based in Nuuk, as are seven out of ten consultancy firms (Nielsen 2005). It is a fact that urban life is the reality for a major part of the population, and even the remotest small community in Greenland is tied structurally into the urban centres and depends on them for a number of services. The vulnerability and resilience of smaller communities is thus closely linked to the development of urban

Photos: Jakob Christensen Medonos

centres. Because of this structural integration Greenland can, as such, be termed an urban society.

What is interesting is not the size of the Greenlandic cities, even though this does of course influence urbanity. The importance of these cities lies in the significance Arctic people ascribe to them and what social, cultural and economic capital they invest in them. Arctic cities have indeed become movers of change with respect to education, employment, politics, administration, art, sport, recreation, investment, healthcare and so forth. The urban centres constitute a primary arena for cultural creativity and cultural production among Greenlanders, and Inuit in general. In the urban areas, a multiplicity of Inuit identities and numerous strategies by which Arctic peoples can engage in modernity and post-modernity can be found. These urban centres are, for example, arenas for experimenting with new ways of understanding communication, conflict resolution, neighbouring, sociality, family life and family obligations. The urban arena in Nuuk is also a setting where Danish entrepreneurs and Thai restaurant owners add to the cross-cutting social and cultural life. This multicultural setting may establish new ways of understanding belonging and social organisation. In the Arctic cities, fragmentation of the social order, and of the economic and social heterogeneity of Arctic communities, is becoming evident and, at times, it is being mapped out in the urban space. Areas of poor and marginalised Inuit are developing as well as areas of rich and successful Inuit. Unbearable housing problems, homelessness and social polarisation are also facts of urban Arctic life.

But we also see that Arctic city dwellers definitely engage, invest and flourish in the cities. Nuuk is always referred to as a Danish town. It is not supposed to reflect the real Greenland. But 26% of the Greenlandic population actually lives in Nuuk and a study by Danish anthropologist Bo Wagner Sørensen (2005) indicates that the inhabitants of Nuuk like it, and have made the city their own. This should not come as a surprise, as Nuuk and other big cities in Greenland have become more attractive and now constitute dynamic arenas where Inuit and human cultural and social creativity can be lived out, exposed, challenged, transformed and communicated. Cities are doing their best to promote themselves as attractive. This was seen, for example, in 2006 and the spring of 2007 when the cities of Nuuk, Sisimiut and Maniitsoq competed to appear as attractive to investment as possible. At stake was a potential agreement with a foreign company to establish a large aluminium smelting plant which could lead to the creation of several thousand new jobs. Such competition over limited resources (including an educated workforce) is quite frequent.

When Greenlandic cities stand for possibilities and welfare they attract people (especially the young) as well as industry. This urban orientation has increasingly made it more difficult for smaller communities to maintain their position in the modernisation process defined by the Home Rule. If this continues, it will most likely be ever more difficult to maintain a livelihood in small and remote communities, and part of the Greenlandic population will probably feel like bystanders in the development being pursued by the Home Rule's policy to strengthen the economy and independence of Greenland.

Urban cultural and political platforms

When young urban Greenlanders engage creatively in the hip-hop culture, present themselves on Myspace

or are attracted to a career as a mining engineer, it is a part of contemporary Greenlandic culture. This is because they enact and fulfil themselves as Greenlanders in a – for them – meaningful and self-ascribed way. When the Inuit-run Home Rule government aims to strengthen self-determination for Greenland by creating an effective economy in which urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation are central elements, it can be seen as a part of Greenlandic culture and society. The endeavours of the indigenous people of Greenland to strengthen their society and to break the asymmetric relationship with Denmark – a process termed *Greenlandisation* - have increasingly been based on claiming their right as political agents to determine their own future rather than on the basis of a well-defined cultural agenda. Even though *Greenlandisation* may, for many, entail a degree of specific cultural perspective, I claim that it primarily entails the wish that Greenland should be run by Greenlanders (Sejersen 2004). It can therefore be claimed that the future of Greenlandic culture and society is based on the *possibility* of making choices and dealing with the positive and negative consequences of those choices, rather than on the *content* of the choices. The focus on the political possibility of making choices rather than the content of the choices does, of course, not rule out the fact that governments may take uninformed and devastating choices that may have consequences for parts of the population. The degree and direction of urbanisation is one of these difficult choices.

The case of urbanisation in Greenland shows that there is no one-to-one relationship between urbanisation and indigenous peoples. In the post Second World War period, urbanisation was part of a colonial and modernising project determined and operated by the Danish authorities. Today, urbanisation is determined and operated by the Inuit-run government as part of a strategy to create a more self-determined Greenland, loosening its colonial ties with Denmark. The temporal and spatial specificities of urban forms and processes therefore have to be acknowledged as they offer an appreciation of the alternatives for organising urban societies (Leeds 1994: 52).

It is also important to appreciate that the Greenland case is quite unique. Few indigenous peoples around the world have the same political and economic possibilities that may make urbanisation a viable strategy. The Greenlandic political institution of the Home Rule and the municipal councils discuss, coordinate and evaluate decisions. Quite in contrast to this situation, millions of indigenous people living in urban areas worldwide have to make uninformed and uncoordinated choices on an individual or family level, where the "urban dream" often turns out to be a life of extreme poverty and socio-cultural disorientation.

This century has been named the urban century, as more people now live in cities than in rural areas. An increasing number of individuals belonging to indigenous groups also live in urban areas for a number of reasons (Dahl and Jensen 2002) and they face a structurally enforced culture of poverty and discrimination. The potential to make urban life meaningful and viable for indigenous peoples may lie in the creation of urban political platforms through which they can articulate their demands and raise their problems in more coordinated ways. Such urban platforms, founded on the awareness and rights of indigenous peoples, may even hold the potential to improve the lives of indigenous peoples living outside urban areas, and of non-indigenous peoples sharing similar living conditions in the city. ❑

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Frank Sejersen *- Department of Cross Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen.*